

Testimony of LtCol. Joseph M. Plenzler, USMC (ret.)

To

The House Committee on Veterans Affairs

October 13, 2021

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Joe Plenzler. I'm a 20-year retired United States Marine Corps officer and combat veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I served from 1995 to 2015 as an infantry officer and later as a public affairs officer to General Mattis during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and three successive Commandants of the Marine Corps: Generals James Conway, James Amos, and Joe Dunford, from 2010 to 2015. In 2013, I served as the speechwriter to the Commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul Afghanistan. Since retiring from the military, I've held leadership positions at three national military and veteran focused nonprofit organizations - The United States Naval Institute, The American Legion National Headquarters, and The Wounded Warrior Project. I am currently a co-founder of the leadership development and human communication firm Cassandra-Helenus Partners with my wife and business partner, retired Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Kate Germano.

My path to military service began on April 7, 1990, when my friends and I set out with other students to protest members of the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi skinheads who attempted to march on minority recruitment weekend through our college town of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.¹ We successfully disrupted their parade and rally and it was then that I realized the importance of taking a stand, putting one's body behind one's beliefs, and making a commitment to be counted in the fight against hate and extremism. This experience taught me the necessity to publicly confront bigotry and stand up for what's right. It taught me the value of speaking up against injustice. It taught me that the wrongs we ignore, we condone; and that to do good, we must take action. We can't just talk. It also reinforced my belief that it is every citizen's responsibility to advance the ideals set forth in our Constitution and Declaration of Independence to ensure our society works for all its citizens - not just the wealthy, powerful, and well connected.

The following year, I transferred to The Ohio State University, where I graduated in 1994. I spent the next 20 years of my life supporting and defending the Constitution of the United States as a commissioned officer in the United States Marine Corps.

While working in the field of public affairs in operational environments in Iraq and Afghanistan and as a graduate student at San Diego State University from 2009-2010, I had the opportunity to study the tactics, techniques and procedures violent extremist groups use to recruit members and incite them to violence. These terrorist organizations use sophisticated recruiting, communication, and indoctrination methods to attract followers, provide them a sense of community and purpose, and incite them to violence. At the individual level, violent extremists weaponize influence by preying on the human brain's sensitivity to appeals to scarcity, sanction and fear, consistency, altruism, and reward.

At the strategic level, the center of gravity of these violent extremist groups is their ability to build cults of personality around their leadership, to control resources, and to recruit and organize new members in order to demoralize target populations, destabilize them, incite insurgency, and then normalize the imposition of their will upon the behavior of others. They are also adept at using traditional and social media to ensure their propaganda is seen, understood, remembered and acted upon.² They seek to create resonance within target audiences and advance messages that are initially in line with existing opinions, beliefs, and dispositions, and

¹ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-protesting-the-klk-led-me-to-join-the-military>

² Qualter, T. H. (1962). *Propaganda and psychological warfare*. New York, NY: Random House.

then bend and warp perceptions to gain compliance with their ideologies.³ Violent extremist organizations also use special techniques to maximize effects - like suicide bombings carefully coordinated with media operations to greatly extend psychological damage far beyond localized events.

After returning from foreign battlefields, I turned my eyes domestically and came to this sobering conclusion. Violent extremism is a concerning and growing problem in America, and, by extension, the military and veteran communities.

Domestic terrorist incidents have soared to a 25 year high - driven mostly by white-supremacist, anti-Muslim, and anti-government extremists according to a recent study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.⁴ Since 9/11, we've seen a shift from plots and attacks by religious extremists to those perpetrated by groups advancing political grievances. The Federal Bureau of Investigation reported, "2019 was the deadliest year for domestic extremist violence since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995."⁵ Extremists on the far right and far left have accounted for 333 plots and 110 fatalities since 2015. Right wing violent extremist groups accounted for 80 percent of the plots and 83 percent of the deaths during this period, while left wing violent extremists accounted for 20 percent of plots and 17 percent of deaths.⁶

In March of 2021, the intelligence community (IC) released a report stating that domestic violent extremists (DVE) who are "motivated by a range of ideologies and galvanized by recent political and societal events in the United States pose an elevated risk to the Homeland in 2021." Further, the IC assessed, "racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) and militia violent extremists (MVEs) present the most lethal DVE threats, with RMVEs most likely to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians and MVEs typically targeting law enforcement and government personnel and facilities."⁷

These are precisely the groups that target veterans for recruitment.

Domestic security experts are increasingly concerned about the rising participation of law enforcement members, active duty and reserve service members, and veterans within the ranks of these violent extremist groups, especially the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, and Proud Boys, who actively target veterans for recruitment.^{8 9 10} In March of this year, the Department of Defense submitted a report to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees stating:

"Some domestic extremist networks "(a) actively attempt to recruit military personnel into their group or cause, (b) encourage their members to join the military, or (c) join, themselves, for the

³ Jowett, G. S., & O'Donnell, V. (2006). *Propaganda and persuasion*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/>

⁵ <https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/worldwide-threats-to-the-homeland-092420>

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/>

⁷

<https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/11/right-wing-militias-civil-war/616473/>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/18/us/politics/capitol-riot-militias.html>

¹⁰

<https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/01/31/marine-veteran-among-two-proud-boys-facing-federal-conspiracy-charges-in-capitol-riot/>

purpose of acquiring combat and tactical experience.”¹¹

Domestic violent extremist groups target military members and veterans for recruitment because veterans are seen as community leaders with great ability to organize and lead groups of people. Veterans also are likely to have practical experience in weapons handling and employment, tactical planning, and small unit leadership. Because veterans tend to have deep connections with each other and their communities, extremist groups view us as economically efficient targets.¹² Their goal is to recruit veterans and incite them to violence in the pursuit of their objectives.

This has been a persistent, multi-decade problem for the Department of Defense.¹³ In fact, when I was a young infantry platoon commander in the late 1990s, I recall receiving briefs on what clues and warnings to pay attention to that indicated a Marine or sailor was a member of, or sympathetic towards, violent extremist groups or criminal gangs. Our leaders frequently spoke of how these groups attempt to send their members into the military to receive training in weapons and tactics and better position themselves to gain access to and steal military weapons and explosives. While I’m confident that the Department of Defense can adequately address the problem of extremists in the ranks of our 2.1 million strong active and reserve components,¹⁴ I am much more concerned about extremism within the ranks of America’s 19 million strong veteran community.¹⁵

Unlike the Department of Defense with its multiple layers of leadership backed by the Uniform Code of Military Justice, there is no similar leadership hierarchy or judicial system specific to the veteran community. This is by design. Once military members leave the Department of Defense, they rejoin the civilian community and civilian system of justice. In addressing the growing threat of domestic violent extremism, we are entirely reliant on a patchwork of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. Both in scale and complexity, extremism in the veteran community is more challenging to address.

There has been recent discussion within this chamber about the scope of the problem - whether this is an isolated or widespread issue, and if it merits systemic investigation. This is a red herring. If your doctor told you she found a very small cluster of cancer cells in your body, representing .001% of your body’s total mass, surely you would not ignore that news. You’d investigate it, determine the scope of the problem, and develop a plan with an oncologist to limit its spread and defeat it. The same holds true for the problem of violent extremism within the military and veteran communities.

We know from history that domestic terrorists can have a disproportionately powerful impact on our nation. When domestic violent extremist groups commit violence against our people, they also damage our national psyche. While they may be few, they are very dangerous. I’ll highlight a few examples. It only took one Marine Corps veteran by the name of Lee Harvey Oswald to stun a nation and change the history of the presidency of the United States. It only took two

¹¹

<https://media.defense.gov/2021/Mar/02/2002592042/-1/-1/0/REPORT-TO-ARMED-SERVICES-COMMITTEES-ON-SCREENING-INDIVIDUALS-WHO-SEEK-TO-ENLIST-IN-THE-ARMED-FORCES.PDF>

¹²

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/amanpour-and-company/video/why-are-white-supremacists-trying-to-recruit-veterans/>

¹³ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states>

¹⁴ https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_Budget_Request.pdf

¹⁵ https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp

Army veterans by the names of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols to destroy the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and to kill 168 people, to include 19 children, and wound hundreds more - one of the largest domestic terrorist attacks in our history.¹⁶ During the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, it only took one Army veteran by the name of Eric Rudolph to plant and detonate a bomb that killed and injured 112 people. Rudolph then went on to bomb three other communities before his capture. It only took one Army veteran by the name of Nidal Hasan to terrorize the Fort Hood community - killing 13 people and injuring 30. It only took one Army veteran by the name of Wade Michael Page, a devoted white supremacist, to open fire on a Sikh temple in Milwaukee in August of 2012 - killing six and wounding four people.

And just this past January, an insurrectionist mob of thousands, engaging in seditious conspiracy and organized and led in part by violent extremist groups, invaded this house and despoiled the very altar of our democratic republic.¹⁷ This violent extremist mob sought to take by force possession of this Capitol and prevent the affirmation of the 2020 Presidential Election results. Some within the mob called for the lynching of the Vice President of the United States, as they ransacked offices and hunted for the Speaker of the House and other members of Congress.¹⁸ Of the more than 620 arrested as of September 29, 2021, 71 had ties to the military community - representing 12 percent of the mob. Of those, one was active duty, two were in the National Guard, and two were in the reserves. Sixty-six were veterans.¹⁹ Investigators have linked 77 of those arrested to violent extremist groups. And I'm ashamed to report more than 20 of those arrested served in the Marines and dishonored themselves, their families, and the illustrious legacy of our Corps with their actions that day.²⁰ Marines are supposed to defend our democracy, not attack it.

Beyond the shameful events of January 6, 2021, we also know, veterans have been connected in 10% of all domestic terrorist attacks since 2015.²¹ This is staggering when you consider less than 2% of the American population serves in the military, and veterans comprise about 6% of the US population.

The January 6th insurrection was more than an isolated incident and it also damaged the reputation of America's 19 million veterans - the vast majority of whom served honorably and continue to serve their communities as upstanding citizens. While recent research shows veterans to be the most respected and trusted group in our society, public trust and confidence in our military and in our veterans has slipped. A recent Reagan Foundation study found, "The number of Americans who say they have a great deal of trust and confidence in the military has fallen by 14 percentage points (from 70% to 56%) since 2018. In that time, the military declined in trust across all major demographic subgroups (including age, gender, and party affiliation) by

¹⁶

<https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Merrick%20Garland%20SFR%20for%20SAC%20DVE%20Hearing%2005-12-2021.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2384>

¹⁸

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-video-shows-capitol-mob-calling-for-the-death-of-the-vice-president-plaskett-says>

¹⁹ <https://extremism.gwu.edu/Capitol-Hill-Cases>

²⁰ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-capitol-riot-arrests-latest/>

²¹

<https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/think-tank-report-reveals-steady-uptick-in-military-personnel-involved-in-terrorist-attacks-plots-1.669484>

double-digit percentage points.²² And a recent study by the nonpartisan Veterans and Citizens Initiative found that public perception of veterans as good role models fell from 61% in December of 2020 to 47% in March of 2021.²³ As long as our country retains an all volunteer military, it is vital that we protect the honor, prestige, and reputation of our Department of Defense and our veteran community as the most trusted segments of our society. Future recruiting, in many ways, depends on it.

As FBI Director Christopher Wray told the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 2, 2021, “January 6 was not an isolated event. The problem of domestic terrorism has been metasasizing across the country for a long time now and it’s not going to go away anytime soon.” January 6 was a wake up call for us all, and a prime example of what happens when people lose faith in their government and fall prey to radicalization. Far too many of our fellow Americans have been duped, and we need leaders who are willing to stand up and say: these falsehoods are not true, they are not right, and they are un-American.

For decades, political partisanship has created political extremists who have created, fomented, and incited violent extremists.

We have known for many years that violent extremist groups and criminal gangs seek to infiltrate the Armed Forces to provide their members tactical training and access to military weapons. We also know that they actively recruit veterans because of their military skills, leadership, and ability to organize. We also know that violent extremist groups seek the isolated, economically disadvantaged, the frustrated or confused who are struggling to adapt to the civilian world and provide them with a tribe, a simplistic view of the world and its problems, actionable solutions and a sense of purpose. These vulnerable individuals are fed a concoction of lies to increase their sense of status, certainly, autonomy, and relatedness - propelled by an unrelenting narrative of grievance.

A recent RAND study on domestic radicalization based on interviews with extremists showed financial instability, poor mental health, and societal factors like victimization, stigmatization, and marginalization to be primary drivers towards radicalization, and that online propaganda and recruitment, as well as criminal activity and imprisonment, were primary pathways towards radicalization.²⁴ Veterans in the process of military to civilian transition are particularly vulnerable to extremist recruitment as they, for the first time, navigate myriad decisions ranging from where to live, choosing their future occupation, securing work, determining fair compensation, addressing service-connected disabilities, and finding a second life built on continued service and profound meaning.

Before the internet, extremist groups had to make physical contact with recruits. Today, the internet and social media have provided the tools to increase the rapidity and scale of their recruitment efforts.

So, while the Department of Defense is working to lead our 2.1 million men and women in

²²

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/356703/reagan-institute-march-2021-defense-survey-press-release.pdf>

²³

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f91012fcf265e0faa9bbebc/t/6058da13f45e96664a816164/1616435732151/VCI_Survey+Data+Summary+23+Mar+21.pdf

²⁴ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1071-1.html

uniform and confront this issue, what can Congress and the 19 million strong veteran community do to help protect America against extremism?

First, we must better understand the problem. I commend this committee in launching an investigation into this issue, and I applaud the work of leading think tanks and universities on this issue and I urge greater coordination with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security.

Second, VSOs must raise awareness of this threat. There are 48 Congressionally chartered veteran service organizations and 14 other veteran and military associations affiliated with this committee.²⁵ The combined membership of the “Big Six” VSOs is more than 5.1 million veterans, and the combined social media reach of The Military Coalition exceeds 6 million followers. The leaders of these 62 national organizations should be strongly encouraged to speak out about this growing threat, reinforce expectations among their members, and proactively work to identify and assist at-risk veterans in their communities. Our nation needs their unequivocal support to help address the threat of violent extremism.

Third, we must improve our efforts to prevent veterans from joining these organizations. I urge this committee to work with the HASC to direct the DOD to modify its Transition Assistance Program to include a class on the threat of domestic terrorists and violent extremist groups and their efforts to recruit. Veterans in the process of military to civilian transition are particularly vulnerable to extremist recruitment as they navigate re-entry to the civilian world. This class should also provide FBI recommendations on what to do if approached by these groups.

The VSOs have a role too. They have the means to reach out to and assist individuals at risk to help connect them with physical, mental, and economic health and wellness support programs. They can also provide positive social networks, help reduce political tension, and improve veterans’ social and economic integration. Members of these VSOs are also respected members of their communities. As such, they are positioned to execute community-based countering violent extremism strategies²⁶ by:

- Helping community members understand and identify violent extremism and risks
- Assisting community leaders in countering violent extremist ideology
- Leveraging their experiences in the military to set the example of people from myriad walks of life, cultural groups, and religions coming together to unite our communities
- Promoting policies that address political grievances
- Strengthening the government’s capacity to curtail violent extremism
- Educating our fellow citizens, especially our youth, on the way our democracy is supposed to work through civic literacy programs

Strong veteran service organizations focused on providing veterans stable mental, physical, and economic health and wellness combined with an ethos of continued service to community, state, and nation are one our greatest weapons in creating protective factors against veteran recruitment by violent extremist groups.

Fourth, we must identify veterans who are participating in violent extremist groups and identify them to authorities. The veteran community must police its own.

Fifth, we must provide veterans who leave these organizations a pathway back into the fold.

²⁵ <https://republicans-veterans.house.gov/resources-for-veterans/veterans-service-organizations.htm>

²⁶ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1799.html

Lastly, I encourage all of you to remind your colleagues and the members of your respective parties to prioritize the truth over personal political gain. I believe our great nation is at an inflection point - a unique moment where moral and political courage is desperately needed. If we are to survive as a democratic republic for another 245 years, it will not be through division, ad hominem attacks, big lies, degrading each other, and cracking public faith in our institutions. Our republic will be sustained by magnanimous and humble leaders, committed to the principles of American democracy, to pull our people to the center - both Republican and Democrat, both Conservative and Liberal - to work in good faith for the common good. Our democracy will be preserved by sapient, forthright men and women who are willing to speak the truth even when it flies in the face of personal political gain. This committee has a long and well earned legacy for bipartisan achievement and I pray this spirit can spread throughout the House and Senate. Our future depends on it.

President Abraham Lincoln was right when he said:

“All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the Earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years. At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”

The data is undeniable. Domestic violent extremism is on the rise and it is a grave threat to our democratic republic. We have a responsibility to understand how deeply this affects the veteran community and take action now to defeat the cancer of violent extremism within our society.

Together, we can help our nation heal from decades of bitter partisanship and forge a better future for all Americans by building a more just and peaceful society that meets the needs of all Americans.